



Being Mortal



About the Author:

Atul Gawande, MD, MPH, is a surgeon, writer, and public health researcher. He practices general and endocrine surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital. He is Professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the Samuel O. Thier Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School. He is also Executive Director of Ariadne Labs, a joint center for health systems innovation, and Chairman of Lifebox, a nonprofit organization making surgery safer globally.

Atul is a staff writer for The New Yorker magazine, and has written four New York Times bestsellers. He is the winner of two National Magazine Awards, AcademyHealth's Impact Award for highest research impact on healthcare, a MacArthur Fellowship, and the Lewis Thomas Award for writing about science.

Inside the kit:

- (8) copies of the book
- (1) book club guide

About the Book:

(from the author's website)

Through eye-opening research and gripping stories of his own patients and family, Atul Gawande reveals the suffering this dynamic has produced. Nursing homes, devoted above all to safety, battle with residents over the food they are allowed to eat and the choices they are allowed to make. Doctors, uncomfortable discussing patients' anxieties about death, fall back on false hopes and treatments that are actually shortening lives instead of improving them. And families go along with all of it.

In his bestselling books, Gawande, a practicing surgeon, has fearlessly revealed the struggles of his profession. Now he examines its ultimate limitations and failures – in his own practices as well as others' – as life draws to a close. And he discovers how we can do better. He follows a hospice nurse on her rounds, a geriatrician in his clinic, and reformers turning nursing homes upside down. He finds people who show us how to have the hard conversations and how to ensure we never sacrifice what people really care about.

Suggested Reads:

Knocking on Heaven's Door: Medicine and What Matters in the End by Katy Butler

The Beauty in Breaking by Michele Harper

Dear Life by Rachel Clarke



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1. Why do we assume we will know how to empathize and comfort those in end-of-life stages? How prepared do you feel to do and say the right thing when that time comes for someone in your life?
2. What do you think the author means when he says that we've "medicalized mortality"?
3. As a child, what did you observe about the aging process? How was mortality discussed in your family?
4. Have you ever seen anyone die? What was it like? How did the experience affect your wishes for the end of your own life?
5. Did you read Alice Hobson's story as an inspiring one, or as a cautionary tale?
6. Chapter 4 describes the birth of the assisted-living facility concept (Park Place), designed by Keren Wilson to provide her disabled mother, Jessie, with caregivers who would not restrict her freedom. What does it mean to you to treat someone with serious infirmities as a person and not a patient?
7. What realities are captured in the story of Lou Sanders and his daughter, Shelley, regarding home care? What conflicts did Shelley face between her intentions and the practical needs of the family and herself? What does the book illustrate about the universal nature of this struggle in families around the globe?
8. Reading about Bill Thomas's Eden Alternative in Chapter 5, what came to mind when he outlined the Three Plagues of nursing home existence: boredom, loneliness and helplessness? What do you think matters most when you envision eldercare?
9. Often medical treatments do not work. Yet our society seems to favor attempts to "fix" health problems, no matter the odds of their success. Dr. Gawande quotes statistics that show 25% of Medicare spending goes to the 5% of patients in the last stages of life. Why do you think it's so difficult for doctors and/or families to refuse or curtail treatment? How should priorities be set?
10. How was your reading affected by the book's final scene, as Dr. Gawande fulfills his father's wishes? How do tradition and spirituality influence your concept of what it means to be mortal?